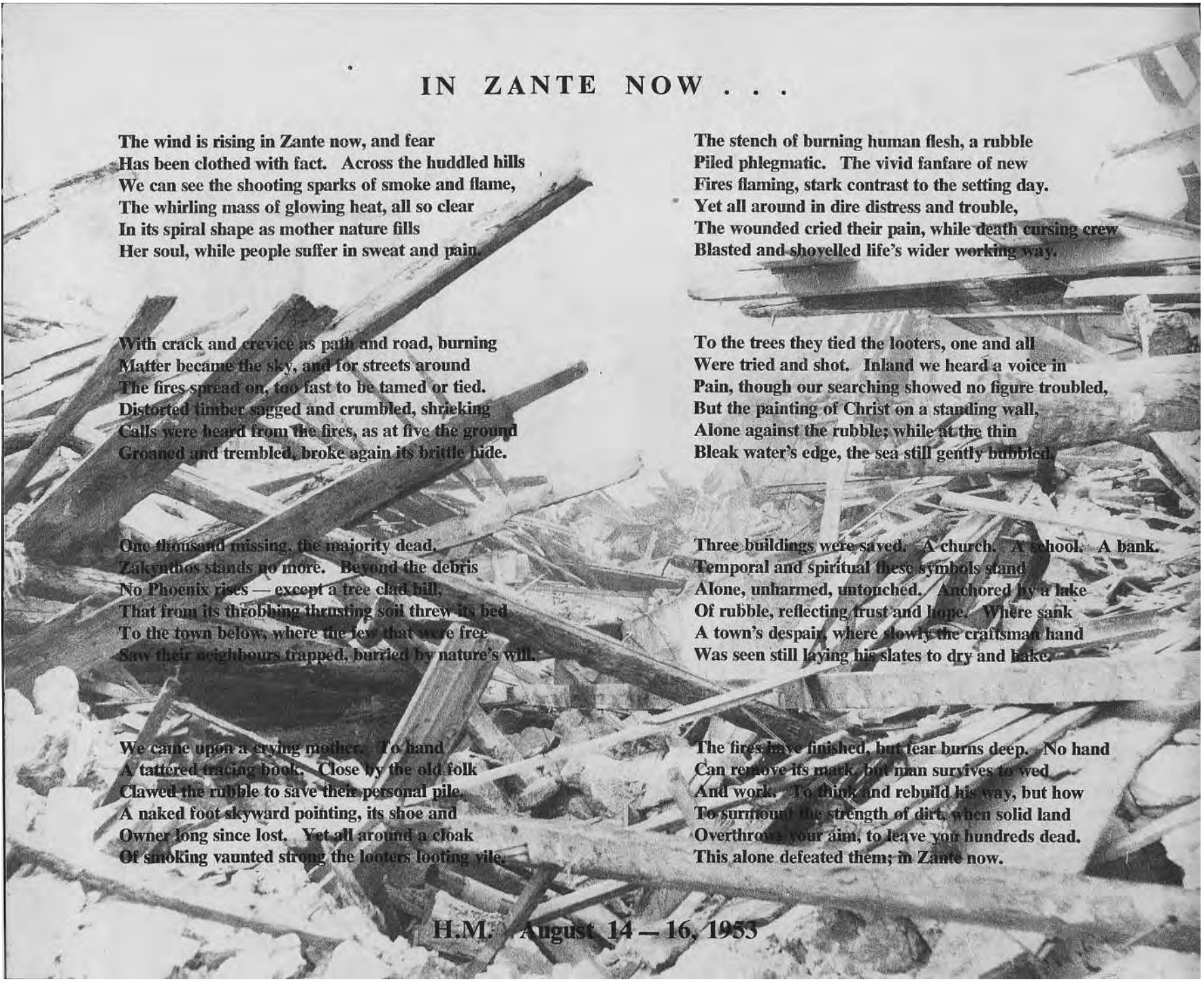

IN ZANTE NOW . . .

The wind is rising in Zante now, and fear
Has been clothed with fact. Across the huddled hills
We can see the shooting sparks of smoke and flame,
The whirling mass of glowing heat, all so clear
In its spiral shape as mother nature fills
Her soul, while people suffer in sweat and pain.

With crack and crevice as path and road, burning
Matter became the sky, and for streets around
The fires spread on, too fast to be tamed or tied.
Distorted timber sagged and crumbled, shrieking
Calls were heard from the fires, as at five the ground
Groaned and trembled, broke again its brittle hide.

One thousand missing, the majority dead,
Zakynthos stands no more. Beyond the debris
No Phoenix rises — except a tree clad hill,
That from its throbbing thrusting soil threw its bed
To the town below, where the few that were free
Saw their neighbours trapped, buried by nature's will.

We came upon a crying mother. To hand
A tattered tracing book. Close by the old folk
Clawed the rubble to save their personal pile.
A naked foot skyward pointing, its shoe and
Owner long since lost. Yet all around a cloak
Of smoking vaunted strong the looters looting vile.

The stench of burning human flesh, a rubble
Piled phlegmatic. The vivid fanfare of new
Fires flaming, stark contrast to the setting day.
Yet all around in dire distress and trouble,
The wounded cried their pain, while death cursing crew
Blasted and shovelled life's wider working way.

To the trees they tied the looters, one and all
Were tried and shot. Inland we heard a voice in
Pain, though our searching showed no figure troubled,
But the painting of Christ on a standing wall,
Alone against the rubble; while at the thin
Bleak water's edge, the sea still gently bubbled.

Three buildings were saved. A church. A school. A bank.
Temporal and spiritual these symbols stand
Alone, unharmed, untouched. Anchored by a lake
Of rubble, reflecting trust and hope. Where sank
A town's despair, where slowly the craftsman hand
Was seen still laying his slates to dry and bake.

The fires have finished, but fear burns deep. No hand
Can remove its mark, but man survives to wed
And work. To think and rebuild his way, but how
To surmount the strength of dirt, when solid land
Overthrows your aim, to leave you hundreds dead.
This alone defeated them; in Zante now.

H.M. August 14 — 16, 1953

Chapter VI

"Beyond the Call of Duty"

Thursday, August 13, 1953

FROM C - IN - C. MED. TO GAMBIA — " Proceed at full speed to Argostoli in the Ionian Islands to arrive at first light — severe earthquakes have occurred." The epic of Zante was gradually unfolding its pages. The first paragraph was in print, the remainder had yet to be set on the presses in the chronicles of human suffering. The rest of the night and early morning found us hastily preparing emergency stores, provisions and equipment for relief work and although we were low on supplies after our duties in the Suez Canal, most of the items required were produced.

A further signal was received in the early hours of August 14 instructing us to proceed to the capital, Zakynthos, where the damage was believed to be the greatest. We sighted the island at 0700, the town itself hardly discernible through a thick haze of smoke which hung like a shroud over the still and silent town. A Greek landing craft was already anchored in the bay and the Captain was soon making contact with their personnel in an effort to discover the full amount of damage which the quake had wrought.

At 0800 the Royal Marine Battalion and two platoons of seamen and stokers were landed with demolition charges, shovels, and picks with the object of clearing a road through the town to enable casualties and supplies to be moved. The work of all parties was made extremely dangerous by the presence of hand grenades which were stored in practically every house and used by the local fishermen to stun fish; these were exploded continually under the heat of the blaze.

The town itself was found to be divided into three separate sections completely cut off from each other by masses of rubble and fallen masonry and the only possible means of reaching each section was by boat.

Zante had been on fire since the earthquake first struck and was still a blazing mass when we arrived.

From time to time frequent earth tremors still shook the ground and could even be felt on board ship as if depth charges were being exploded in the sea. Each tremor brought fresh destruction to this stricken area, piling debris upon debris until most of the narrow streets were buried to the height of ten feet with fallen bricks and shattered timber.

The only buildings to survive the devastation were the school, the bank, and one of the churches which had only recently been completed. These were taken over as casualty clearing stations and manned by a team of doctors and nurses who had been rushed across from the mainland. The more serious cases were dealt with on board the L.C.T. which had better facilities to deal with them.

The main task of the ship's firefighting squads was to prevent the fire from reaching and destroying the hospital, and as there were no appliances immediately available to fight the fire in the normal way, a fire ditch had to be cleared by means of blasting away the ruined buildings in the immediate vicinity.

By late afternoon the Royal Marines had succeeded in cutting and blasting a road through to the south of the town and casualties were hastily transported by our first-aid teams to the temporary hospital for treatment.

As night set in the sky was lit up by the flames which were still relentlessly eating their way through the town but the work went on unceasingly. Most of the ship's company had been ashore for the better part of the day and night, returning on board for a few hours' sleep before continuing the battle against nature's fury. The majority of the inhabitants had eaten no food for the past three days, neither had they been able to obtain any water and were in a pitiable condition. To ease the situation the bakery worked all hours turning out hundreds of loaves. Milk and every variety of tinned foods were sent ashore as well as water either in barricoes, or when the situation became acute, by filling up the whalers and towing them ashore. The distribution of food, to ensure that every possible person was catered for, became as arduous a task as firefighting. Most of the ratings ashore gave up their bag meals rather than watch the expression on the faces of the island folk as they ate. Many a hardened

C. in C. in Conference

salt was pressed into service as a nursemaid, tenderly holding a baby whilst trying to feed it from a tin of Ideal milk.

At 0800 on Friday, August 14, Earl Mountbatten, accompanied by Lady Mountbatten and staff officers, arrived in the bay in a R.A.F. Sunderland to view the damage and co-ordinate rescue work with the local Greek authorities.

During all this time, Dakotas of the Greek Air Force were circling the town dropping food, medical supplies, and bundles of clothing to the survivors who were grouped around the outskirts of the town. Helicopters were landing on open spaces as well and taking the more seriously wounded back to the mainland.

By the time darkness fell a further road had been cut through. The town and the majority of the survivors had been formed into two large camps, one at each end of the town. This enabled us to carry out a rough census and also facilitated feeding arrangements. During the day two portable diesel pumps had been landed together with a considerable number of fire hoses which made the work of the fire parties much easier and soon most of the major fires were under control.

On Saturday, August 15, an American landing craft and our sister ship, H.M.S. *Bermuda* arrived from Malta loaded up with jeeps, two helicopters, and a large amount of much-needed medical supplies and food. To us on the *Gambia* she was indeed a welcome sight as we had been coping with the aftermath of the disaster almost entirely on our own over the previous two days.

The remainder of the day was spent in turning the job over to *Bermuda* and landing the fresh equipment and stores. Amongst the new arrivals were many bell tents which were soon erected to form small villages to house the homeless population of Zante. Even more welcome were the large field kitchens so sorely needed to cope with the feeding arrangements.

Early on Sunday, August 16, we began to withdraw most of our equipment and rescue squads from the area and soon a long procession of begrimed and exhausted sailors was coming back on board. Most of them were asleep on their feet having preferred to carry on the rescue work throughout the night rather than take the well-earned rest which they so badly needed. Now others had taken up the task which we had started and our job for the present was completed.

At 1200 on Sunday, August 16, H.M.S. *Gambia* sailed for Malta, the following message being received from Mr. C. D. Bultzo, Member of Parliament for Zante;

> "Having just come back from Zante and having worked side by side with the C.O. and Ship's Company of H.M.S. *Gambia* I would like to commend them for their gallantry and services rendered beyond the call of duty.
>
> "We Greeks have a long-standing tradition with the Royal Navy and it lived up to every expectation in its infallible tradition of always being the first to help.
>
> " The high degree of discipline and training of H.M.S. *Gambia's* complement produced magnificent results felt all through the island of Zante.
>
> "May I also convey to you as the Head of Her Britannic Majesty's Naval Mission here our heartfelt gratitude."

And as we sailed from Zante the following message received from the Greek destroyer anchored in the bay warmed our hearts__ " May God bless you and your gallant ship."

Thus ended Zante.

C.B.

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